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LAST POEMS AND PLAYS

LAST POEMS
&
PLAYS

BY
W. B. YEATS

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LAST POEMS

1936-1939

SWEET DANCER

The girl goes dancing there
On the leaf-sown, new-mown, smooth
Grass plot of the garden ;
Escaped from bitter youth,
Escaped out of her crowd,
Or out of her black cloud.

Ah, dancer, ah, sweet dancer !

If strange men come from the house
To lead her away, do not say
That she is happy being crazy ;
Lead them gently astray ;
Let her finish her dance,
Let her finish her dance.

Ah, dancer, ah, sweet dancer !

THE THREE BUSHES

*(An incident from the 'Historia mei Temporis' of the
Abbé Michel de Bourdeille)*

Said lady once to lover,
‘None can rely upon
A love that lacks its proper food ;
And if your love were gone
How could you sing those songs of love ?
I should be blamed, young man.’
O my dear, O my dear.

‘Have no lit candles in your room,’
That lovely lady said,
‘That I at midnight by the clock
May creep into your bed,
For if I saw myself creep in
I think I should drop dead.’
O my dear, O my dear.

‘I love a man in secret,
Dear chambermaid,’ said she.
‘I know that I must drop down dead
If he stop loving me,
Yet what could I but drop down dead
If I lost my chastity ?’
O my dear, O my dear.

‘So you must lie beside him
And let him think me there,
And maybe we are all the same
Where no candles are,

And maybe we are all the same
That strip the body bare.'

O my dear, O my dear.

But no dogs barked, and midnights chimed,
And through the chime she'd say,
' That was a lucky thought of mine,
My lover looked so gay ' ;
But heaved a sigh if the chambermaid
Looked half asleep all day.

O my dear, O my dear.

' No, not another song,' said he,
' Because my lady came
A year ago for the first time
At midnight to my room,
And I must lie between the sheets
When the clock begins to chime.'

O my dear, O my dear.

' A laughing, crying, sacred song,
A leching song,' they said.
Did ever men hear such a song ?
No, but that day they did.
Did ever man ride such a race ?
No, not until he rode.

O my dear, O my dear.

But when his horse had put its hoof
Into a rabbit-hole
He dropped upon his head and died.
His lady saw it all

And dropped and died thereon, for she
Loved him with her soul.

O my dear, O my dear.

The chambermaid lived long, and took
Their graves into her charge,
And there two bushes planted
That when they had grown large
Seemed sprung from but a single root
So did their roses merge.

O my dear, O my dear.

When she was old and dying,
The priest came where she was ;
She made a full confession.
Long looked he in her face,
And O he was a good man
And understood her case.

O my dear, O my dear.

He bade them take and bury her
Beside her lady's man,
And set a rose-tree on her grave,
And now none living can,
When they have plucked a rose there,
Know where its roots began.

O my dear, O my dear.

THE · L A D Y ' S F I R S T S O N G

I turn round
Like a dumb beast in a show,
Neither know what I am
Nor where I go,
My language beaten
Into one name ;
I am in love
And that is my shame.
What hurts the soul
My soul adores,
No better than a beast
Upon all fours.

THE LADY'S SECOND SONG

What sort of man is coming
To lie between your feet ?
What matter, we are but women.
Wash ; make your body sweet ;
I have cupboards of dried fragrance,
I can strew the sheet.

The Lord have mercy upon us.

He shall love my soul as though
Body were not at all,
He shall love your body
Untroubled by the soul,
Love cram love's two divisions
Yet keep his substance whole.

The Lord have mercy upon us.

Soul must learn a love that is
Proper to my breast,
Limbs a love in common
With every noble beast.
If soul may look and body touch,
Which is the more blest ?

The Lord have mercy upon us.

THE LADY'S THIRD SONG

When you and my true lover meet
And he plays tunes between your feet,
Speak no evil of the soul,
Nor think that body is the whole,
For I that am his daylight lady
Know worse evil of the body ;
But in honour split his love
Till either neither have enough,
That I may hear if we should kiss
A contrapuntal serpent hiss,
You, should hand explore a thigh,
All the labouring heavens sigh.

THE LOVER'S SONG

Bird sighs for the air,
Thought for I know not where,
For the womb the seed sighs.
Now sinks the same rest
On mind, on nest,
On straining thighs.

THE CHAMBERMAID'S FIRST SONG

How came this ranger
Now sunk in rest,
Stranger with stranger,
On my cold breast ?
What's left to sigh for,
Strange night has come ;
God's love has hidden him
Out of all harm,
Pleasure has made him
Weak as a worm.

THE CHAMBERMAID'S SECOND SONG

From pleasure of the bed,
Dull as a worm,
His rod and its butting head
Limp as a worm,
His spirit that has fled
Blind as a worm.

AN ACRE OF GRASS

Picture and book remain,
An acre of green grass
For air and exercise,
Now strength of body goes ;
Midnight, an old house
Where nothing stirs but a mouse.

My temptation is quiet.
Here at life's end
Neither loose imagination,
Nor the mill of the mind
Consuming its rag and bone,
Can make the truth known.

Grant me an old man's frenzy,
Myself must I remake
Till I am Timon and Lear
Or that William Blake
Who beat upon the wall
Till Truth obeyed his call ;

A mind Michael Angelo knew
That can pierce the clouds,
Or inspired by frenzy
Shake the dead in their shrouds ;
Forgotten else by mankind,
An old man's eagle mind.

WHAT THEN?

His chosen comrades thought at school
He must grow a famous man ;
He thought the same and lived by rule,
All his twenties crammed with toil ;
' What then ? ' sang Plato's ghost. ' What then ? '

Everything he wrote was read,
After certain years he won
Sufficient money for his need,
Friends that have been friends indeed ;
' What then ? ' sang Plato's ghost. ' What then ? '

All his happier dreams came true —
A small old house, wife, daughter, son,
Grounds where plum and cabbage grew,
Poets and Wits about him drew ;
' What then ? ' sang Plato's ghost. ' What then ? '

*' The work is done,' grown old he thought,
' According to my boyish plan ;
Let the fools rage, I swerved in naught,
Something to perfection brought ; '
But louder sang that ghost, ' What then ? '*

BEAUTIFUL LOFTY THINGS

Beautiful lofty things : O'Leary's noble head ;
My father upon the Abbey stage, before him a raging
crowd :
' This Land of Saints,' and then as the applause died
out,
' Of plaster Saints ' ; his beautiful mischievous head
thrown back.
Standish O'Grady supporting himself between the
tables
Speaking to a drunken audience high nonsensical
words ;
Augusta Gregory seated at her great ormolu table,
Her eightieth winter approaching : ' Yesterday he
threatened my life.
I told him that nightly from six to seven I sat at this
table,
The blinds drawn up ' ; Maud Gonne at Howth station
waiting a train,
Pallas Athene in that straight back and arrogant head :
All the Olympians ; a thing never known again.

A CRAZED GIRL

That crazed girl improvising her music,
Her poetry, dancing upon the shore,
Her soul in division from itself
Climbing, falling she knew not where,
Hiding amid the cargo of a steamship,
Her knee-cap broken, that girl I declare
A beautiful lofty thing, or a thing
Heroically lost, heroically found.

No matter what disaster occurred
She stood in desperate music wound,
Wound, wound, and she made in her triumph
Where the bales and the baskets lay
No common intelligible sound
But sang, ' O sea — starved, hungry sea.'

TO DOROTHY WELLESLEY

Stretch towards the moonless midnight of the trees,
As though that hand could reach to where they stand,
And they but famous old upholsteries
Delightful to the touch ; tighten that hand
As though to draw them closer yet.

Rammed full

Of that most sensuous silence of the night
(For since the horizon's bought strange dogs are still)
Climb to your chamber full of books and wait,
No books upon the knee, and no one there
But a Great Dane that cannot bay the moon
And now lies sunk in sleep.

What climbs the stair ?

Nothing that common women ponder on
If you are worth my hope ! Neither Content
Nor satisfied Conscience, but that great family
Some ancient famous authors misrepresent,
The Proud Furies each with her torch on high.

THE CURSE OF CROMWELL

You ask what I have found, and far and wide I go :
Nothing but Cromwell's house and Cromwell's
murderous crew,
The lovers and the dancers are beaten into the clay,
And the tall men and the swordsmen and the horsemen,
where are they ?
And there is an old beggar wandering in his pride —
His fathers served their fathers before Christ was
crucified.

*O what of that, O what of that,
What is there left to say ?*

All neighbourly content and easy talk are gone,
But there's no good complaining, for money's rant
is on.
He that's mounting up must on his neighbour mount,
And we and all the Muses are things of no account.
They have schooling of their own, but I pass their
schooling by,
What can they know that we know that know the
time to die ?

*O what of that, O what of that,
What is there left to say ?*

But there's another knowledge that my heart destroys,
As the fox in the old fable destroyed the Spartan boy's,
Because it proves that things both can and cannot be ;
That the swordsmen and the ladies can still keep
company,

Can pay the poet for a verse and hear the fiddle sound,
That I am still their servant though all are under-
ground.

*O what of that, O what of that,
What is there left to say ?*

I came on a great house in the middle of the night,
Its open lighted doorway and its windows all alight,
And all my friends were there and made me welcome
too ;

But I woke in an old ruin that the winds howled
through ;

And when I pay attention I must out and walk
Among the dogs and horses that understand my talk.

*O what of that, O what of that,
What is there left to say ?*

ROGER CASEMENT

(After reading 'The Forged Casement Diaries' by Dr. Maloney)

I say that Roger Casement
Did what he had to do.
He died upon the gallows,
But that is nothing new.

Afraid they might be beaten
Before the bench of Time,
They turned a trick by forgery
And blackened his good name.

A perjurer stood ready
To prove their forgery true ;
They gave it out to all the world,
And that is something new ;

For Spring Rice had to whisper it,
Being their Ambassador,
And then the speakers got it
And writers by the score.

Come Tom and Dick, come all the troop
That cried it far and wide,
Come from the forger and his desk,
Desert the perjurer's side ;

Come speak your bit in public
That some amends be made
To this most gallant gentleman
That is in quicklime laid.

THE GHOST OF ROGER CASEMENT

O what has made that sudden noise ?
What on the threshold stands ?
It never crossed the sea because
John Bull and the sea are friends ;
But this is not the old sea
Nor this the old seashore.
What gave that roar of mockery,
That roar in the sea's roar ?
The ghost of Roger Casement
Is beating on the door.

John Bull has stood for Parliament,
A dog must have his day,
The country thinks no end of him,
For he knows how to say,
At a beanfeast or a banquet,
That all must hang their trust
Upon the British Empire,
Upon the Church of Christ.
The ghost of Roger Casement
Is beating on the door.

John Bull has gone to India
And all must pay him heed,
For histories are there to prove
That none of another breed
Has had a like inheritance,
Or sucked such milk as he,

And there's no luck about a house
If it lack honesty.

*The ghost of Roger Casement
Is beating on the door.*

I poked about a village church
And found his family tomb
And copied out what I could read
In that religious gloom ;
Found many a famous man there ;
But fame and virtue rot.
Draw round, beloved and bitter men,
Draw round and raise a shout ;
*The ghost of Roger Casement
Is beating on the door.*

THE O'RAHILLY

Sing of the O'Rahilly,
Do not deny his right ;
Sing a ' the ' before his name ;
Allow that he, despite
All those learned historians,
Established it for good ;
He wrote out that word himself,
He christened himself with blood.
How goes the weather ?

Sing of the O'Rahilly
That had such little sense
He told Pearse and Connolly
He'd gone to great expense
Keeping all the Kerry men
Out of that crazy fight ;
That he might be there himself
Had travelled half the night.
How goes the weather ?

' Am I such a craven that
I should not get the word
But for what some travelling man
Had heard I had not heard ? '
Then on Pearse and Connolly
He fixed a bitter look :
' Because I helped to wind the clock
I come to hear it strike.'
How goes the weather ?

What remains to sing about
But of the death he met
Stretched under a doorway
Somewhere off Henry Street ;
They that found him found upon
The door above his head
' Here died the O'Rahilly.
R.I.P.' writ in blood.

How goes the weather ?

COME GATHER ROUND ME, PARNELLITES

Come gather round me, Parnellites,
And praise our chosen man ;
Stand upright on your legs awhile,
Stand upright while you can,
For soon we lie where he is laid,
And he is underground ;
Come fill up all those glasses
And pass the bottle round.

And here's a cogent reason,
And I have many more,
He fought the might of England
And saved the Irish poor,
Whatever good a farmer's got
He brought it all to pass ;
And here's another reason,
That Parnell loved a lass.

And here's a final reason,
He was of such a kind
Every man that sings a song
Keeps Parnell in his mind.
For Parnell was a proud man,
No prouder trod the ground,
And a proud man's a lovely man,
So pass the bottle round.

The Bishops and the Party
That tragic story made,

A husband that had sold his wife
And after that betrayed ;
But stories that live longest
Are sung above the glass,
And Parnell loved his country,
And Parnell loved his lass.

THE WILD OLD WICKED MAN

‘ Because I am mad about women
I am mad about the hills,’
Said that wild old wicked man
Who travels where God wills.

‘ Not to die on the straw at home,
Those hands to close these eyes,
That is all I ask, my dear,
From the old man in the skies.

Daybreak and a candle-end.

‘ Kind are all your words, my dear,
Do not the rest withhold.
Who can know the year, my dear,
When an old man’s blood grows cold ?
I have what no young man can have
Because he loves too much.

Words I have that can pierce the heart,
But what can he do but touch ? ’

Daybreak and a candle-end.

Then said she to that wild old man,
His stout stick under his hand,
‘ Love to give or to withhold
Is not at my command.
I gave it all to an older man :
That old man in the skies.
Hands that are busy with His beads
Can never close those eyes.’

Daybreak and a candle-end.

‘ Go your ways, O go your ways,
I choose another mark,
Girls down on the seashore
Who understand the dark ;
Bawdy talk for the fishermen ;
A dance for the fisher-lads ;
When dark hangs upon the water
They turn down their beds.

Daybreak and a candle-end.

‘ A young man in the dark am I,
But a wild old man in the light,
That can make a cat laugh, or
Can touch by mother wit
Things hid in their marrow-bones
From time long passed away,
Hid from all those warty lads
That by their bodies lay.

Daybreak and a candle-end.

‘ All men live in suffering,
I know as few can know,
Whether they take the upper road
Or stay content on the low,
Rower bent in his row-boat
Or weaver bent at his loom,
Horseman erect upon horseback
Or child hid in the womb.

Daybreak and a candle-end.

‘ That some stream of lightning
From the old man in the skies

Can burn out that suffering
No right-taught man denies.
But a coarse old man am I,
I choose the second-best,
I forget it all awhile
Upon a woman's breast.'
Daybreak and a candle-end.

THE GREAT DAY

Hurrah for revolution and more cannon-shot !
A beggar upon horseback lashes a beggar on foot.
Hurrah for revolution and cannon come again !
The beggars have changed places, but the lash goes on.

PARNELL

Parnell came down the road, he said to a cheering man :

‘ Ireland shall get her freedom and you still break stone.’

WHAT WAS LOST

I sing what was lost and dread what was won,
I walk in a battle fought over again,
My king a lost king, and lost soldiers my men ;
Feet to the Rising and Setting may run,
They always beat on the same small stone.

THE SPUR

You think it horrible that lust and rage
Should dance attention upon my old age ;
They were not such a plague when I was young ;
What else have I to spur me into song ?

A DRUNKEN MAN'S PRAISE OF SOBRIETY

Come swish around, my pretty punk,
And keep me dancing still
That I may stay a sober man
Although I drink my fill.
Sobriety is a jewel
That I do much adore ;
And therefore keep me dancing
Though drunkards lie and snore.
O mind your feet, O mind your feet,
Keep dancing like a wave,
And under every dancer
A dead man in his grave.
No ups and downs, my pretty,
A mermaid, not a punk ;
A drunkard is a dead man,
And all dead men are drunk.

THE PILGRIM

I fasted for some forty days on bread and buttermilk,
For passing round the bottle with girls in rags or silk,
In country shawl or Paris cloak, had put my wits astray,
And what's the good of women, for all that they can say
Is fol de rol de rolly O.

Round Lough Derg's holy island I went upon the stones,
I prayed at all the Stations upon my marrow-bones,
And there I found an old man, and though I prayed all
day
And that old man beside me, nothing would he say
But fol de rol de rolly O.

All know that all the dead in the world about that place
are stuck,
And that should mother seek her son she'd have but
little luck
Because the fires of Purgatory have ate their shapes away ;
I swear to God I questioned them, and all they had to
say
Was fol de rol de rolly O.

A great black ragged bird appeared when I was in the
boat ;
Some twenty feet from tip to tip had it stretched rightly
out,
With flopping and with flapping it made a great display,
But I never stopped to question, what could the boat-
man say
But fol de rol de rolly O.

Now I am in the public-house and lean upon the wall,
So come in rags or come in silk, in cloak or country
shawl,
And come with learned lovers or with what men you
may,
For I can put the whole lot down, and all I have to say
Is fol de rol de rolly O.

COLONEL MARTIN

I

The Colonel went out sailing,
He spoke with Turk and Jew,
With Christian and with Infidel,
For all tongues he knew.
' O what's a wifeless man ? ' said he,
And he came sailing home.
He rose the latch and went upstairs
And found an empty room.
The Colonel went out sailing.

II

' I kept her much in the country
And she was much alone,
And though she may be there,' he said,
' She may be in the town.
She may be all alone there,
For who can say ? ' he said.
' I think that I shall find her
In a young man's bed.'
The Colonel went out sailing.

III

The Colonel met a pedlar,
Agreed their clothes to swop,
And bought the grandest jewelry
In a Galway shop,

Instead of thread and needle
Put jewelry in the pack,
Bound a thong about his hand,
Hitched it on his back.

The Colonel went out sailing.

IV

The Colonel knocked on the rich man's door,
'I am sorry,' said the maid,
'My mistress cannot see these things,
But she is still abed,
And never have I looked upon
Jewelry so grand.'

'Take all to your mistress,'
And he laid them on her hand.

The Colonel went out sailing.

V

And he went in and she went on
And both climbed up the stair,
And O he was a clever man,
For he his slippers wore.
And when they came to the top stair
He ran on ahead,
His wife he found and the rich man
In the comfort of a bed.

The Colonel went out sailing.

VI

The Judge at the Assize Court,
When he heard that story told,

Awarded him for damages
Three kegs of gold.
The Colonel said to Tom his man,
‘ Harness an ass and cart,
Carry the gold about the town,
Throw it in every part.’
The Colonel went out sailing.

VII

And there at all street-corners
A man with a pistol stood,
And the rich man had paid them well
To shoot the Colonel dead ;
But they threw down their pistols
And all men heard them swear
That they could never shoot a man
Did all that for the poor.
The Colonel went out sailing.

VIII

‘ And did you keep no gold, Tom ?
You had three kegs,’ said he.
‘ I never thought of that, Sir.’
‘ Then want before you die.’
And want he did ; for my own grand-dad
Saw the story’s end,
And Tom make out a living
From the seaweed on the strand.
The Colonel went out sailing.

A MODEL FOR THE LAUREATE

On thrones from China to Peru
All sorts of kings have sat
That men and women of all sorts
Proclaimed both good and great ;
And what's the odds if such as these
For reason of the State
Should keep their lovers waiting,
Keep their lovers waiting ?

Some boast of beggar-kings and kings
Of rascals black and white
That rule because a strong right arm
Puts all men in a fright,
And drunk or sober live at ease
Where none gainsay their right,
And keep their lovers waiting,
Keep their lovers waiting.

The Muse is mute when public men
Applaud a modern throne :
Those cheers that can be bought or sold,
That office fools have run,
That waxen seal, that signature.
For things like these what decent man
Would keep his lover waiting,
Keep his lover waiting ?

THE OLD STONE CROSS

A statesman is an easy man,
He tells his lies by rote ;
A journalist makes up his lies
And takes you by the throat ;
So stay at home and drink your beer
And let the neighbours vote,
*Said the man in the golden breastplate
Under the old stone Cross.*

Because this age and the next age
Engender in the ditch,
No man can know a happy man
From any passing wretch ;
If Folly link with Elegance
No man knows which is which,
*Said the man in the golden breastplate
Under the old stone Cross.*

But actors lacking music
Do most excite my spleen,
They say it is more human
To shuffle, grunt and groan,
Not knowing what unearthly stuff
Rounds a mighty scene,
*Said the man in the golden breastplate
Under the old stone Cross.*

THE SPIRIT MEDIUM

Poetry, music, I have loved, and yet
Because of those new dead
That come into my soul and escape
Confusion of the bed,
Or those begotten or unbegotten
Perning in a band,
I bend my body to the spade
Or grope with a dirty hand.

Or those begotten or unbegotten,
For I would not recall
Some that being unbegotten
Are not individual,
But copy some one action,
Moulding it of dust or sand,
I bend my body to the spade
Or grope with a dirty hand.

An old ghost's thoughts are lightning,
To follow is to die ;
Poetry and music I have banished,
But the stupidity
Of root, shoot, blossom or clay
Makes no demand.
I bend my body to the spade
Or grope with a dirty hand.

THOSE IMAGES

What if I bade you leave
The cavern of the mind ?
There's better exercise
In the sunlight and wind.

I never bade you go
To Moscow or to Rome.
Renounce that drudgery,
Call the Muses home.

Seek those images
That constitute the wild,
The lion and the virgin,
The harlot and the child.

Find in middle air
An eagle on the wing,
Recognise the five
That make the Muses sing.

THE MUNICIPAL GALLERY REVISITED

I

Around me the images of thirty years :
An ambush ; pilgrims at the water-side ;
Casement upon trial, half hidden by the bars,
Guarded ; Griffiths staring in hysterical pride ;
Kevin O'Higgins' countenance that wears
A gentle questioning look that cannot hide
A soul incapable of remorse or rest ;
A revolutionary soldier kneeling to be blessed.

II

An Abbot or Archbishop with an upraised hand
Blessing the Tricolour. ' This is not,' I say,
' The dead Ireland of my youth, but an Ireland
The poets have imagined, terrible and gay.'
Before a woman's portrait suddenly I stand,
Beautiful and gentle in her Venetian way.
I met her all but fifty years ago
For twenty minutes in some studio.

III

Heart-smitten with emotion I sink down,
My heart recovering with covered eyes ;
Wherever I had looked I had looked upon
My permanent or impermanent images :
Augusta Gregory's son ; her sister's son,
Hugh Lane, ' onlie begetter ' of all these ;

Hazel Lavery living and dying, that tale
As though some ballad-singer had sung it all.

IV

Mancini's portrait of Augusta Gregory,
'Greatest since Rembrandt,' according to John Synge ;
A great ebullient portrait certainly ;
But where is the brush that could show anything
Of all that pride and that humility ?
And I am in despair that time may bring
Approved patterns of women or of men
But not that selfsame excellence again.

V

My mediaeval knees lack health until they bend,
But in that woman, in that household where
Honour had lived so long, all lacking found.
Childless I thought, 'My children may find here
Deep-rooted things,' but never foresaw its end,
And now that end has come I have not wept ;
No fox can foul the lair the badger swept.

VI

(An image out of Spenser and the common tongue.)
John Synge, I and Augusta Gregory, thought
All that we did, all that we said or sang
Must come from contact with the soil, from that
Contact everything Antaeus-like grew strong.
We three alone in modern times had brought
Everything down to that sole test again,
Dream of the noble and the beggar-man.

VII

And here's John Synge himself, that rooted man,
' Forgetting human words,' a grave deep face.
You that would judge me, do not judge alone
This book or that, come to this hallowed place
Where my friends' portraits hang and look thereon ;
Ireland's history in their lineaments trace ;
Think where man's glory most begins and ends,
And say my glory was I had such friends.

ARE YOU CONTENT?

I call on those that call me son,
Grandson, or great-grandson,
On uncles, aunts, great-uncles or great-aunts,
To judge what I have done.
Have I, that put it into words,
Spoilt what old loins have sent ?
Eyes spiritualised by death can judge,
I cannot, but I am not content.

He that in Sligo at Drumcliff
Set up the old stone Cross,
That red-headed rector in County Down,
A good man on a horse,
Sandymount Corbets, that notable man
Old William Pollexfen,
The smuggler Middleton, Butlers far back,
Half legendary men.

Infirm and aged I might stay
In some good company,
I who have always hated work,
Smiling at the sea,
Or demonstrate in my own life
What Robert Browning meant
By an old hunter talking with Gods ;
But I am not content.

THREE SONGS TO THE ONE BURDEN

I

The Roaring Tinker if you like,
But Mannion is my name,
And I beat up the common sort
And think it is no shame.
The common breeds the common,
A lout begets a lout,
So when I take on half a score
I knock their heads about.
*From mountain to mountain ride the
fierce horsemen.*

All Mannions come from Manannan,
Though rich on every shore
He never lay behind four walls
He had such character,
Nor ever made an iron red
Nor soldered pot or pan ;
His roaring and his ranting
Best please a wandering man.
*From mountain to mountain ride the
fierce horsemen.*

Could Crazy Jane put off old age
And ranting time renew,
Could that old god rise up again
We'd drink a can or two,

And out and lay our leadership
On country and on town,
Throw likely couples into bed
And knock the others down.
*From mountain to mountain ride the
fierce horsemen.*

II

My name is Henry Middleton,
I have a small demesne,
A small forgotten house that's set
On a storm-bitten green.
I scrub its floors and make my bed,
I cook and change my plate,
The post and garden-boy alone
Have keys to my old gate.
*From mountain to mountain ride the
fierce horsemen.*

Though I have locked my gate on them,
I pity all the young,
I know what devil's trade they learn
From those they live among,
Their drink, their pitch-and-toss by day,
Their robbery by night ;
The wisdom of the people's gone,
How can the young go straight ?
*From mountain to mountain ride the
fierce horsemen.*

When every Sunday afternoon
On the Green Lands I walk

And wear a coat in fashion,
Memories of the talk
Of henwives and of queer old men
Brace me and make me strong ;
There's not a pilot on the perch
Knows I have lived so long.
*From mountain to mountain ride the
fierce horsemen.*

III

Come gather round me, players all :
Come praise Nineteen-Sixteen,
Those from the pit and gallery
Or from the painted scene
That fought in the Post Office
Or round the City Hall,
Praise every man that came again,
Praise every man that fell.
*From mountain to mountain ride the
fierce horsemen.*

Who was the first man shot that day ?
The player Connolly,
Close to the City Hall he died ;
Carriage and voice had he ;
He lacked those years that go with skill,
But later might have been
A famous, a brilliant figure
Before the painted scene.
*From mountain to mountain ride the
fierce horsemen.*

Some had no thought of victory
But had gone out to die
That Ireland's mind be greater,
Her heart mount up on high ;
And yet who knows what's yet to come ?
For Patrick Pearse had said
That in every generation
Must Ireland's blood be shed.
*From mountain to mountain ride the
fierce horsemen.*

IN TARA'S HALLS

A man I praise that once in Tara's Halls
Said to the woman on his knees, ' Lie still.
My hundredth year is at an end. I think
That something is about to happen, I think
That the adventure of old age begins.
To many women I have said, " Lie still,"
And given everything a woman needs,
A roof, good clothes, passion, love perhaps,
But never asked for love ; should I ask that,
I shall be old indeed.'

Thereon the man
Went to the Sacred House and stood between
The golden plough and harrow and spoke aloud
That all attendants and the casual crowd might hear.
' God I have loved, but should I ask return
Of God or woman, the time were come to die.'
He bade, his hundred and first year at end,
Diggers and carpenters make grave and coffin ;
Saw that the grave was deep, the coffin sound,
Summoned the generations of his house,
Lay in the coffin, stopped his breath and died.

NEWS FOR THE DELPHIC ORACLE

I

There all the golden codgers lay,
There the silver dew,
And the great water sighed for love,
And the wind sighed too.
Man-picker Niamh leant and sighed
By Oisín on the grass ;
There sighed amid his choir of love
Tall Pythagoras.
Plotinus came and looked about,
The salt-flakes on his breast,
And having stretched and yawned awhile
Lay sighing like the rest.

II

Straddling each a dolphin's back
And steadied by a fin,
Those Innocents re-live their death,
Their wounds open again.
The ecstatic waters laugh because
Their cries are sweet and strange,
Through their ancestral patterns dance,
And the brute dolphins plunge
Until, in some cliff-sheltered bay
Where wades the choir of love
Proffering its sacred laurel crowns,
They pitch their burdens off.

III

Slim adolescence that a nymph has stripped,
Peleus on Thetis stares.

Her limbs are delicate as an eyelid,
Love has blinded him with tears ;
But Thetis' belly listens.

Down the mountain walls
From where Pan's cavern is
Intolerable music falls.

Foul goat-head, brutal arm appear,
Belly, shoulder, bum,
Flash fishlike ; nymphs and satyrs
Copulate in the foam.

THREE MARCHING SONGS¹

I

Remember all those renowned generations,
They left their bodies to fatten the wolves,
They left their homesteads to fatten the foxes,
Fled to far countries, or sheltered themselves
In cavern, crevice, or hole,
Defending Ireland's soul.

*Be still, be still, what can be said ?
My father sang that song,
But time amends old wrong,
All that is finished, let it fade.*

Remember all those renowned generations,
Remember all that have sunk in their blood,
Remember all that have died on the scaffold,
Remember all that have fled, that have stood,
Stood, took death like a tune
On an old tambourine.

*Be still, be still, what can be said ?
My father sang that song,
But time amends old wrong,
And all that's finished, let it fade.*

Fail, and that history turns into rubbish,
All that great past to a trouble of fools ;

¹ Rewritten December 1938.

Those that come after shall mock at O'Donnell,
Mock at the memory of both O'Neills,
Mock Emmet, mock Parnell,
All the renown that fell.

*Be still, be still, what can be said ?
My father sang that song,
But time amends old wrong,
And all that's finished, let it fade.*

II

The soldier takes pride in saluting his Captain,
The devotee proffers a knee to his Lord,
Some back a mare thrown from a thoroughbred,
Troy backed its Helen ; Troy died and adored ;
Great nations blossom above ;
A slave bows down to a slave.

*What marches through the mountain pass ?
No, no, my son, not yet ;
That is an airy¹ spot,
And no man knows what treads the grass.*

We know what rascal might has defiled,
The lofty innocence that it has slain,
Were we not born in the peasant's cot
Where men forgive if the belly gain ?
More dread the life that we live,
How can the mind forgive ?

¹ 'Airy' may be an old pronunciation of 'erie' often heard in Galway and Sligo.

*What marches down the mountain pass ?
No, no, my son, not yet ;
That is an airy spot,
And no man knows what treads the grass.*

What if there's nothing up there at the top ?
Where are the captains that govern mankind ?
What tears down a tree that has nothing within it ?
A blast of the wind, O a marching wind,
March wind, and any old tune,
March, march, and how does it run ?

*What marches down the mountain pass ?
No, no, my son, not yet ;
That is an airy spot,
And no man knows what treads the grass.*

III

Grandfather sang it under the gallows :
' Hear, gentlemen, ladies, and all mankind :
Money is good and a girl might be better,
But good strong blows are delights to the mind.'
There, standing on the cart,
He sang it from his heart.

*Robbers had taken his old tambourine,
But he took down the moon
And rattled out a tune ;
Robbers had taken his old tambourine.*

' A girl I had, but she followed another,
Money I had, and it went in the night,

Strong drink I had, and it brought me to sorrow,
But a good strong cause and blows are delight.'
All there caught up the tune :
' On, on, my darling man.'

*Robbers had taken his old tambourine,
But he took down the moon
And rattled out a tune ;
Robbers had taken his old tambourine.*

' Money is good and a girl might be better,
No matter what happens and who takes the fall,
But a good strong cause ' — the rope gave a jerk there,
No more sang he, for his throat was too small ;
But he kicked before he died,
He did it out of pride.

*Robbers had taken his old tambourine,
But he took down the moon
And rattled out a tune ;
Robbers had taken his old tambourine.*

LONG - LEGGED FLY

That civilisation may not sink,
Its great battle lost,
Quiet the dog, tether the pony
To a distant post ;
Our master Caesar is in the tent
Where the maps are spread,
His eyes fixed upon nothing,
A hand under his head.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

That the topless towers be burnt
And men recall that face,
Move most gently if move you must
In this lonely place.
She thinks, part woman, three parts a child,
That nobody looks ; her feet
Practise a tinker shuffle
Picked up on a street.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
Her mind moves upon silence.

That girls at puberty may find
The first Adam in their thought,
Shut the door of the Pope's chapel,
Keep those children out.
There on that scaffolding reclines
Michael Angelo.

With no more sound than the mice make
His hand moves to and fro.
Like a long-legged fly upon the stream
His mind moves upon silence.

A B R O N Z E H E A D

Here at right of the entrance this bronze head,
Human, superhuman, a bird's round eye,
Everything else withered and mummy-dead.
What great tomb-haunter sweeps the distant sky
(Something may linger there though all else die ;)
And finds there nothing to make its terror less
sterica passio of its own emptiness ?

No dark tomb-haunter once ; her form all full
As though with magnanimity of light,
Yet a most gentle woman ; who can tell
Which of her forms has shown her substance right ?
Or maybe substance can be composite,
Profound McTaggart thought so, and in a breath
A mouthful held the extreme of life and death.

But even at the starting-post, all sleek and new,
I saw the wildness in her and I thought
A vision of terror that it must live through
Had shattered her soul. Propinquity had brought
Imagination to that pitch where it casts out
All that is not itself : I had grown wild
And wandered murmuring everywhere, ' My child,
my child ! '

Or else I thought her supernatural ;
As though a sterner eye looked through her eye
On this foul world in its decline and fall ;

On gangling stocks grown great, great stocks run dry,
Ancestral pearls all pitched into a sty,
Heroic reverie mocked by clown and knave,
And wondered what was left for massacre to save.

A STICK OF INCENSE

Whence did all that fury come ?
From empty tomb or Virgin womb ?
Saint Joseph thought the world would melt
But liked the way his finger smelt.

JOHN KINSELLA'S LAMENT FOR
MRS. MARY MOORE

A bloody and a sudden end,
 Gunshot or a noose,
For Death who takes what man would keep,
 Leaves what man would lose.
He might have had my sister,
 My cousins by the score,
But nothing satisfied the fool
 But my dear Mary Moore,
None other knows what pleasures man
 At table or in bed.
What shall I do for pretty girls
 Now my old bawd is dead ?

Though stiff to strike a bargain,
 Like an old Jew man,
Her bargain struck we laughed and talked
 And emptied many a can ;
And O ! but she had stories,
 Though not for the priest's ear,
To keep the soul of man alive,
 Banish age and care,
And being old she put a skin
 On everything she said.
What shall I do for pretty girls
 Now my old bawd is dead ?

The priests have got a book that says
 But for Adam's sin

Eden's Garden would be there
And I there within.
No expectation fails there,
No pleasing habit ends,
No man grows old, no girl grows cold,
But friends walk by friends.
Who quarrels over halfpennies
That plucks the trees for bread ?
What shall I do for pretty girls
Now my old bawd is dead ?

HOUND VOICE

Because we love bare hills and stunted trees
And were the last to choose the settled ground,
Its boredom of the desk or of the spade, because
So many years companioned by a hound,
Our voices carry ; and though slumber-bound,
Some few half wake and half renew their choice,
Give tongue, proclaim their hidden name — ‘ Hound
Voice.’

The women that I picked spoke sweet and low
And yet gave tongue. ‘ Hound Voices ’ were they all.
We picked each other from afar and knew
What hour of terror comes to test the soul,
And in that terror’s name obeyed the call,
And understood, what none have understood,
Those images that waken in the blood.

Some day we shall get up before the dawn
And find our ancient hounds before the door,
And wide awake know that the hunt is on ;
Stumbling upon the blood-dark track once more,
Then stumbling to the kill beside the shore ;
Then cleaning out and bandaging of wounds,
And chants of victory amid the encircling hounds.

HIGH TALK

Processions that lack high stilts have nothing that catches
the eye.

What if my great-granddad had a pair that were twenty
foot high,

And mine were but fifteen foot, no modern stalks upon
higher,

Some rogue of the world stole them to patch up a fence
or a fire.

Because piebald ponies, led bears, caged lions, make but
poor shows,

Because children demand Daddy-long-legs upon his
timber toes,

Because women in the upper storeys demand a face at
the pane,

That patching old heels they may shriek, I take to chisel
and plane.

Malachi Stilt-Jack am I, whatever I learned has run
wild,

From collar to collar, from stilt to stilt, from father to
child.

All metaphor, Malachi, stilts and all. A barnacle goose
Far up in the stretches of night ; night splits and the
dawn breaks loose ;

I, through the terrible novelty of light, stalk on, stalk
on ;

Those great sea-horses bare their teeth and laugh at the
dawn.

THE APPARITIONS

Because there is safety in derision
I talked about an apparition,
I took no trouble to convince,
Or seem plausible to a man of sense,
Distrustful of that popular eye
Whether it be bold or sly.
*Fifteen apparitions have I seen ;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger.*

I have found nothing half so good
As my long-planned half solitude,
Where I can sit up half the night
With some friend that has the wit
Not to allow his looks to tell
When I am unintelligible.
*Fifteen apparitions have I seen ;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger.*

When a man grows old his joy
Grows more deep day after day,
His empty heart is full at length,
But he has need of all that strength
Because of the increasing Night
That opens her mystery and fright.
*Fifteen apparitions have I seen ;
The worst a coat upon a coat-hanger.*

A N A T I V I T Y

What woman hugs her infant there ?
Another star has shot an ear.

What made the drapery glisten so ?
Not a man but Delacroix.

What made the ceiling waterproof ?
Landor's tarpaulin on the roof.

What brushes fly and moth aside ?
Irving and his plume of pride.

What hurries out the knave and dolt ?
Talma and his thunderbolt.

Why is the woman terror-struck ?
Can there be mercy in that look ?

WHY SHOULD NOT OLD MEN BE MAD?

Why should not old men be mad ?
Some have known a likely lad
That had a sound fly-fisher's wrist
Turn to a drunken journalist ;
A girl that knew all Dante once
Live to bear children to a dunce ;
A Helen of social welfare dream,
Climb on a wagonette to scream.
Some think it a matter of course that chance
Should starve good men and bad advance,
That if their neighbours figured plain,
As though upon a lighted screen,
No single story would they find
Of an unbroken happy mind,
A finish worthy of the start.
Young men know nothing of this sort,
Observant old men know it well ;
And when they know what old books tell,
And that no better can be had,
Know why an old man should be mad.

THE STATESMAN'S HOLIDAY

I lived among great houses,
Riches drove out rank,
Base drove out the better blood,
And mind and body shrank.
No Oscar ruled the table,
But I'd a troop of friends
That knowing better talk had gone
Talked of odds and ends.
Some knew what ailed the world
But never said a thing,
So I have picked a better trade
And night and morning sing :
Tall dames go walking in grass-green Avalon.

Am I a great Lord Chancellor
That slept upon the Sack ?
Commanding officer that tore
The khaki from his back ?
Or am I de Valéra,
Or the King of Greece,
Or the man that made the motors ?
Ach, call me what you please !
Here's a Montenegrin lute,
And its old sole string
Makes me sweet music
And I delight to sing :
Tall dames go walking in grass-green Avalon.

With boys and girls about him,
With any sort of clothes,

With a hat out of fashion,
With old patched shoes,
With a ragged bandit cloak,
With an eye like a hawk,
With a stiff straight back,
With a strutting turkey walk,
With a bag full of pennies,
With a monkey on a chain,
With a great cock's feather,
With an old foul tune.
Tall dames go walking in grass-green Avalon.

CRAZY JANE ON THE MOUNTAIN

I am tired of cursing the Bishop,
(Said Crazy Jane)
Nine books or nine hats
Would not make him a man.
I have found something worse
To meditate on.
A King had some beautiful cousins,
But where are they gone ?
Battered to death in a cellar,
And he stuck to his throne.
Last night I lay on the mountain,
(Said Crazy Jane)
There in a two-horsed carriage
That on two wheels ran
Great-bladdered Emer sat,
Her violent man
Cuchulain sat at her side ;
Thereupon,
Propped upon my two knees,
I kissed a stone ;
I lay stretched out in the dirt
And I cried tears down.

THE CIRCUS ANIMALS' DESERTION

I

I sought a theme and sought for it in vain,
I sought it daily for six weeks or so.
Maybe at last, being but a broken man,
I must be satisfied with my heart, although
Winter and summer till old age began
My circus animals were all on show,
Those stilted boys, that burnished chariot,
Lion and woman and the Lord knows what.

II

What can I but enumerate old themes ?
First that sea-rider Oisín led by the nose
Through three enchanted islands, allegorical dreams,
Vain gaiety, vain battle, vain repose,
Themes of the embittered heart, or so it seems,
That might adorn old songs or courtly shows ;
But what cared I that set him on to ride,
I, starved for the bosom of his faery bride ?

And then a counter-truth filled out its play,
The Countess Cathleen was the name I gave it ;
She, pity-crazed, had given her soul away,
But masterful Heaven had intervened to save it.
I thought my dear must her own soul destroy,
So did fanaticism and hate enslave it,
And this brought forth a dream and soon enough
This dream itself had all my thought and love.

And when the Fool and Blind Man stole the bread
Cuchulain fought the ungovernable sea ;
Heart-mysteries there, and yet when all is said
It was the dream itself enchanted me :
Character isolated by a deed
To engross the present and dominate memory.
Players and painted stage took all my love,
And not those things that they were emblems of.

III

Those masterful images because complete
Grew in pure mind, but out of what began ?
A mound of refuse or the sweepings of a street,
Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can,
Old iron, old bones, old rags, that raving slut
Who keeps the till. Now that my ladder's gone,
I must lie down where all the ladders start,
In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart.

POLITICS

'In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms.'—THOMAS MANN

How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics ?
Yet here's a travelled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there's a politician
That has read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war's alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms !

THE MAN AND THE ECHO

MAN

In a cleft that's christened Alt
Under broken stone I halt
At the bottom of a pit
That broad noon has never lit,
And shout a secret to the stone.
All that I have said and done,
Now that I am old and ill,
Turns into a question till
I lie awake night after night
And never get the answers right.
Did that play of mine send out
Certain men the English shot ?
Did words of mine put too great strain
On that woman's reeling brain ?
Could my spoken words have checked
That whereby a house lay wrecked ?
And all seems evil until I
Sleepless would lie down and die.

ECHO

Lie down and die.

MAN

That were to shirk
The spiritual intellect's great work,
And shirk it in vain. There is no release
In a bodkin or disease,

Nor can there be work so great
As that which cleans man's dirty slate.
While man can still his body keep
Wine or love drug him to sleep,
Waking he thanks the Lord that he
Has body and its stupidity,
But body gone he sleeps no more,
And till his intellect grows sure
That all's arranged in one clear view,
Pursues the thoughts that I pursue,
Then stands in judgment on his soul,
And, all work done, dismisses all
Out of intellect and sight
And sinks at last into the night.

ECHO

Into the night.

MAN

O Rocky Voice,
Shall we in that great night rejoice ?
What do we know but that we face
One another in this place ?
But hush, for I have lost the theme,
Its joy or night seem but a dream ;
Up there some hawk or owl has struck,
Dropping out of sky or rock,
A stricken rabbit is crying out,
And its cry distracts my thought.

CUCHULAIN COMFORTED

A man that had six mortal wounds, a man
Violent and famous, strode among the dead ;
Eyes stared out of the branches and were gone.

Then certain Shrouds that muttered head to head
Came and were gone. He leant upon a tree
As though to meditate on wounds and blood.

A Shroud that seemed to have authority
Among those bird-like things came, and let fall
A bundle of linen. Shrouds by two and three

Came creeping up because the man was still.
And thereupon that linen-carrier said :
' Your life can grow much sweeter if you will

' Obey our ancient rule and make a shroud ;
Mainly because of what we only know
The rattle of those arms makes us afraid.

' We thread the needles' eyes, and all we do
All must together do.' That done, the man
Took up the nearest and began to sew.

' Now must we sing and sing the best we can,
But first you must be told our character :
Convicted cowards all, by kindred slain

‘ Or driven from home and left to die in fear.’
They sang, but had nor human tunes nor words,
Though all was done in common as before ;

They had changed their throats and had the throats
of birds.

January 13, 1939

THE BLACK TOWER

Say that the men of the old black tower,
Though they but feed as the goatherd feeds,
Their money spent, their wine gone sour,
Lack nothing that a soldier needs,
That all are oath-bound men :
Those banners come not in.

*There in the tomb stand the dead upright,
But winds come up from the shore :
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.*

Those banners come to bribe or threaten,
Or whisper that a man's a fool
Who, when his own right king's forgotten,
Cares what king sets up his rule.
If he died long ago
Why do you dread us so ?

*There in the tomb drops the faint moonlight,
But wind comes up from the shore :
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.*

The tower's old cook that must climb and clamber
Catching small birds in the dew of the morn
When we hale men lie stretched in slumber
Swears that he hears the king's great horn.

But he's a lying hound :
Stand we on guard oath-bound !

*There in the tomb the dark grows blacker,
But wind comes up from the shore :
They shake when the winds roar,
Old bones upon the mountain shake.*

January 21, 1939

UNDER BEN BULBEN

I

Swear by what the sages spoke
Round the Mareotic Lake
That the Witch of Atlas knew,
Spoke and set the cocks a-crow.

Swear by those horsemen, by those women
Complexion and form prove superhuman,
That pale, long-visaged company
That air in immortality
Completeness of their passions won ;
Now they ride the wintry dawn
Where Ben Bulben sets the scene.

Here's the gist of what they mean.

II

Many times man lives and dies
Between his two eternities,
That of race and that of soul,
And ancient Ireland knew it all.
Whether man die in his bed
Or the rifle knocks him dead,
A brief parting from those dear
Is the worst man has to fear.
Though grave-diggers' toil is long,
Sharp their spades, their muscles strong,
They but thrust their buried men
Back in the human mind again.

III

You that Mitchel's prayer have heard,
' Send war in our time, O Lord ! '
Know that when all words are said
And a man is fighting mad,
Something drops from eyes long blind,
He completes his partial mind,
For an instant stands at ease,
Laughs aloud, his heart at peace.
Even the wisest man grows tense
With some sort of violence
Before he can accomplish fate,
Know his work or choose his mate.

IV

Poet and sculptor, do the work,
Nor let the modish painter shirk
What his great forefathers did,
Bring the soul of man to God,
Make him fill the cradles right.

Measurement began our might :
Forms a stark Egyptian thought,
Forms that gentler Phidias wrought.
Michael Angelo left a proof
On the Sistine Chapel roof,
Where but half-awakened Adam
Can disturb globe-trotting Madam
Till her bowels are in heat,
Proof that there's a purpose set
Before the secret working mind :
Profane perfection of mankind.

Quattrocento put in paint
On backgrounds for a God or Saint
Gardens where a soul's at ease ;
Where everything that meets the eye,
Flowers and grass and cloudless sky,
Resemble forms that are or seem
When sleepers wake and yet still dream,
And when it's vanished still declare,
With only bed and bedstead there,
That heavens had opened.

Gyres run on ;

When that greater dream had gone
Calvert and Wilson, Blake and Claude,
Prepared a rest for the people of God,
Palmer's phrase, but after that
Confusion fell upon our thought.

v

Irish poets, learn your trade,
Sing whatever is well made,
Scorn the sort now growing up
All out of shape from toe to top,
Their unremembering hearts and heads
Base-born products of base beds.
Sing the peasantry, and then
Hard-riding country gentlemen,
The holiness of monks, and after
Porter-drinkers' randy laughter ;
Sing the lords and ladies gay
That were beaten into the clay
Through seven heroic centuries ;
Cast your mind on other days

That we in coming days may be
Still the indomitable Irishry.

VI

Under bare Ben Bulben's head
In Drumcliff churchyard Yeats is laid.
An ancestor was rector there
Long years ago, a church stands near,
By the road an ancient cross.
No marble, no conventional phrase ;
On limestone quarried near the spot
By his command these words are cut

*Cast a cold eye
On life, on death.
Horseman, pass by !*

September 4, 1938

LAST PLAYS

1938-1939

PURGATORY

PERSONS IN THE PLAY

A BOY .

AN OLD MAN

PURGATORY

SCENE.—*A ruined house and a bare tree in the background.*

BOY

Half-door, hall door,
Hither and thither day and night,
Hill or hollow, shouldering this pack,
Hearing you talk.

OLD MAN

Study that house.
I think about its jokes and stories ;
I try to remember what the butler
Said to a drunken gamekeeper
In mid-October, but I cannot.
If I cannot, none living can.
Where are the jokes and stories of a house,
Its threshold gone to patch a pig-sty ?

BOY

So you have come this path before ?

OLD MAN

The moonlight falls upon the path,
The shadow of a cloud upon the house,
And that's symbolical ; study that tree,
What is it like ?

BOY

A silly old man.

OLD MAN

It's like — no matter what it's like.

I saw it a year ago stripped bare as now,
So I chose a better trade.

I saw it fifty years ago
Before the thunderbolt had riven it,
Green leaves, ripe leaves, leaves thick as butter,
Fat, greasy life. Stand there and look,
Because there is somebody in that house.

[*The BOY puts down pack and stands in the doorway.*]

BOY

There's nobody here.

OLD MAN

There's somebody there.

BOY

The floor is gone, the windows gone,
And where there should be roof there's sky,
And here's a bit of an egg-shell thrown
Out of a jackdaw's nest.

OLD MAN

But there are some
That do not care what's gone, what's left :
The souls in Purgatory that come back
To habitations and familiar spots.

BOY

Your wits are out again.

OLD MAN

Re-live

Their transgressions, and that not once
But many times ; they know at last
The consequence of those transgressions
Whether upon others or upon themselves ;
Upon others, others may bring help,
For when the consequence is at an end
The dream must end ; upon themselves,
There is no help but in themselves
And in the mercy of God.

BOY

I have had enough !
Talk to the jackdaws, if talk you must.

OLD MAN

Stop ! Sit there upon that stone.
That is the house where I was born.

BOY

The big old house that was burnt down ?

OLD MAN

My mother that was your grand-dam owned it,
This scenery and this countryside,
Kennel and stable, horse and hound —
She had a horse at the Curragh, and there met
My father, a groom in a training stable,
Looked at him and married him.
Her mother never spoke to her again,
And she did right.

BOY

What's right and wrong ?
My grand-dad got the girl and the money.

OLD MAN

Looked at him and married him,
And he squandered everything she had.
She never knew the worst, because
She died in giving birth to me,
But now she knows it all, being dead.
Great people lived and died in this house ;
Magistrates, colonels, members of Parliament,
Captains and Governors, and long ago
Men that had fought at Aughrim and the Boyne.
Some that had gone on Government work
To London or to India came home to die,
Or came from London every spring
To look at the may-blossom in the park.
They had loved the trees that he cut down
To pay what he had lost at cards
Or spent on horses, drink and women ;
Had loved the house, had loved all
The intricate passages of the house,
But he killed the house ; to kill a house
Where great men grew up, married, died,
I here declare a capital offence.

BOY

My God, but you had luck ! Grand clothes,
And maybe a grand horse to ride.

OLD MAN

That he might keep me upon his level
He never sent me to school, but some
Half-loved me for my half of her :
A gamekeeper's wife taught me to read,
A Catholic curate taught me Latin.
There were old books and books made fine
By eighteenth-century French binding, books
Modern and ancient, books by the ton.

BOY

What education have you given me ?

OLD MAN

I gave the education that befits
A bastard that a pedlar got
Upon a tinker's daughter in a ditch.
When I had come to sixteen years old
My father burned down the house when drunk.

BOY

But that is my age, sixteen years old,
At the Puck Fair.

OLD MAN

And everything was burnt ;
Books, library, all were burnt.

BOY

Is what I have heard upon the road the truth,
That you killed him in the burning house ?

OLD MAN

There's nobody here but our two selves ?

BOY

Nobody, Father.

OLD MAN

I stuck him with a knife,
That knife that cuts my dinner now,
And after that I left him in the fire.
They dragged him out, somebody saw
The knife-wound but could not be certain
Because the body was all black and charred.
Then some that were his drunken friends
Swore they would put me upon trial,
Spoke of quarrels, a threat I had made.
The gamekeeper gave me some old clothes,
I ran away, worked here and there
Till I became a pedlar on the roads,
No good trade, but good enough
Because I am my father's son,
Because of what I did or may do.
Listen to the hoof-beats ! Listen, listen !

BOY

I cannot hear a sound.

OLD MAN

Beat ! Beat !

This night is the anniversary
Of my mother's wedding night,
Or of the night wherein I was begotten.

My father is riding from the public-house,
A whiskey-bottle under his arm.

[A window is lit showing a young girl.]

Look at the window ; she stands there
Listening, the servants are all in bed,
She is alone, he has stayed late
Bragging and drinking in the public-house.

BOY

There's nothing but an empty gap in the wall.
You have made it up. No, you are mad !
You are getting madder every day.

OLD MAN

It's louder now because he rides
Upon a gravelled avenue
All grass to-day. The hoof-beat stops,
He has gone to the other side of the house,
Gone to the stable, put the horse up.
She has gone down to open the door.
This night she is no better than her man
And does not mind that he is half drunk,
She is mad about him. They mount the stairs
She brings him into her own chamber.
And that is the marriage-chamber now.
The window is dimly lit again.

Do not let him touch you ! It is not true
That drunken men cannot beget,
And if he touch he must beget
And you must bear his murderer.
Deaf ! Both deaf ! If I should throw

A stick or a stone they would not hear ;
And that's a proof my wits are out.
But there's a problem : she must live
Through everything in exact detail,
Driven to it by remorse, and yet
Can she renew the sexual act
And find no pleasure in it, and if not,
If pleasure and remorse must both be there,
Which is the greater ?

I lack schooling.

Go fetch Tertullian ; he and I
Will ravel all that problem out
Whilst those two lie upon the mattress
Begetting me.

Come back ! Come back !

And so you thought to slip away,
My bag of money between your fingers,
And that I could not talk and see !
You have been rummaging in the pack.

[The light in the window has faded out.]

BOY

You never gave me my right share.

OLD MAN

And had I given it, young as you are,
You would have spent it upon drink.

BOY

What if I did ? I had a right
To get it and spend it as I chose.

OLD MAN

Give me that bag and no more words.

BOY

I will not.

OLD MAN

I will break your fingers.

[They struggle for the bag. In the struggle it drops, scattering the money. The OLD MAN staggers but does not fall. They stand looking at each other. The window is lit up. A man is seen pouring whiskey into a glass.]

BOY

What if I killed you? You killed my grand-dad,
Because you were young and he was old.
Now I am young and you are old.

OLD MAN *[staring at window]*

Better-looking, those sixteen years —

BOY

What are you muttering?

OLD MAN

Younger — and yet
She should have known he was not her kind.

BOY

What are you saying? Out with it!

[OLD MAN points to window.]

My God ! The window is lit up
And somebody stands there, although
The floor-boards are all burnt away.

OLD MAN

The window is lit up because my father
Has come to find a glass for his whiskey.
He leans there like some tired beast.

BOY

A dead, living, murdered man !

OLD MAN

‘ Then the bride-sleep fell upon Adam ’ :
Where did I read those words ?

And yet

There’s nothing leaning in the window
But the impression upon my mother’s mind ;
Being dead she is alone in her remorse.

BOY

A body that was a bundle of old bones
Before I was born. Horrible ! Horrible !

[He covers his eyes.]

OLD MAN

That beast there would know nothing, being nothing,
If I should kill a man under the window
He would not even turn his head.

[He stabs the BOY.]

My father and my son on the same jack-knife !

That finishes — there — there — there —

[He stabs again and again. The window grows dark.]

‘Hush-a-bye baby, thy father’s a knight,

Thy mother a lady, lovely and bright.’

No, that is something that I read in a book,

And if I sing it must be to my mother,

And I lack rhyme.

[The stage has grown dark except where the tree stands in white light.]

Study that tree.

It stands there like a purified soul,

All cold, sweet, glistening light.

Dear mother, the window is dark again,

But you are in the light because

I finished all that consequence.

I killed that lad because he had grown up,

He would have struck a woman’s fancy,

Begot, and passed pollution on.

I am a wretched foul old man

And therefore harmless. When I have stuck

This old jack-knife into a sod

And pulled it out all bright again,

And picked up all the money that he dropped,

I’ll to a distant place, and there

Tell my old jokes among new men.

[He cleans the knife and begins to pick up money.]

Hoof-beats ! Dear God,

How quickly it returns — beat — beat — !

Her mind cannot hold up that dream.

Twice a murderer and all for nothing,

And she must animate that dead night

Not once but many times !

O God,
Release my mother's soul from its dream !
Mankind can do no more. Appease
The misery of the living and the remorse of the dead.

THE END

THE DEATH OF CUCHULAIN

PERSONS IN THE PLAY

CUCHULAIN

EITHNE INGUBA

AOIFE

EMER

THE MORRIGU, *Goddess of War*

AN OLD MAN

A BLIND MAN

A SERVANT

A SINGER, A PIPER, AND A DRUMMER

began to appear with the first of his collections finding their way back across the Atlantic, and has increased to a point where it assumes a central importance in his work.

Every eye must weep alone
Till I Will be overthrown

—he declared in the short dedicatory poem prefixed to *Another Time*. The manner and the vision are Blake's; with Auden this is no surprise, for it is a familiar habit of his to assimilate an admired author both in style and perception, and to garnish him with native tricks of his own. In this way Housman, Blake, Eliot, the ballads, and Rilke have all taken punishment from him, and have yielded to his predatory imagination in return a series of unique vantage-points for vision. Here the vision is Blake's, and for Auden it is a new and significant one. It appeared early in the war, when close contemplation of the hideous spiritual complexities of the contemporary scene had combined with his newly-matured responsibility to drive him away from his emotional Communism, his light-fingered, ironic psycho-analysis and his private world of nursery symbolisms into a deadly serious examination of the personal integration of the individual man in collective mankind. And in *Another Time* there are hints that he had found the valuable secret embodied in the Blakean couplet I have just quoted, a secret even more philosophical than poetic, more religious than philosophical, the secret that he holds in common with Shakespeare and Dostoievsky as well as with Blake, and which is at the roots of some of the most striking imaginative work in the world's literature; the doctrine of the abnegation of the individual self and its active agent the will, which being interpreted and extended becomes a positive proclamation of the necessity of active love.

This vision once glimpsed, there can be no reversion. Yet his next poem, *New Year Letter*, betrayed no sign of it; was in fact a pretentious farrago of facile rhymed octosyllabics, embodying series after series of slick and hardly significant highbrow wise-cracks—a panorama, in fact, of intellectual bewilderment, in

That's from the musicians ; I asked them to do that if I was getting excited. If you were as old you would find it easy to get excited. Before the night ends you will meet the music. There is a singer, a piper and a drummer. I have picked them up here and there about the streets, and I will teach them, if I live, the music of the beggar-man, Homer's music. I promise a dance. I wanted a dance because where there are no words there is less to spoil. Emer must dance, there must be severed heads — I am old, I belong to mythology — severed heads for her to dance before. I had thought to have had those heads carved, but no, if the dancer can dance properly no wood-carving can look as well as a parallelogram of painted wood. But I was at my wit's end to find a good dancer ; I could have got such a dancer once, but she has gone ; the tragi-comedian dancer, the tragic dancer, upon the same neck love and loathing, life and death. I spit three times. I spit upon the dancers painted by Degas. I spit upon their short bodices, their stiff stays, their toes whereon they spin like peg-tops, above all upon that chambermaid face. They might have looked timeless, Rameses the Great, but not the chambermaid, that old maid history. I spit ! I spit ! I spit !

[The stage is darkened, the curtain falls. Pipe and drum begin and continue until the curtain rises on a bare stage. Half a minute later EITHNE INGUBA enters.]

EITHNE

Cuchulain ! Cuchulain !

[CUCHULAIN enters from back.]

I am Emer's messenger,

I am your wife's messenger, she has bid me say

You must not linger here in sloth, for Maeve
With all those Connacht ruffians at her back
Burns barns and houses up at Emain Macha :
Your house at Muirthemne already burns.
No matter what's the odds, no matter though
Your death may come of it, ride out and fight.
The scene is set and you must out and fight.

CUCHULAIN

You have told me nothing. I am already armed,
I have sent a messenger to gather men,
And wait for his return. What have you there ?

EITHNE

I have nothing.

CUCHULAIN

There is something in your hand.

EITHNE

No.

CUCHULAIN

Have you a letter in your hand ?

EITHNE

I do not know how it got into my hand.
I am straight from Emer. We were in some place.
She spoke. She saw.

CUCHULAIN

This letter is from Emer,
It tells a different story. I am not to move
Until to-morrow morning, for, if now,

I must face odds no man can face and live.
To-morrow morning Conall Caernach comes
With a great host.

EITHNE

I do not understand.
Who can have put that letter in my hand ?

CUCHULAIN

And there is something more to make it certain
I shall not stir till morning : you are sent
To be my bedfellow, but have no fear,
All that is written, but I much prefer
Your own unwritten words. I am for the fight,
I and my handful are set upon the fight ;
We have faced great odds before, a straw decided.
[THE MORRIGU *enters and stands between them.*

EITHNE

I know that somebody or something is there,
Yet nobody that I can see.

CUCHULAIN

There is nobody.

EITHNE

Who among the gods of the air and upper air
Has a bird's head ?

CUCHULAIN

Morrigu is headed like a crow.

EITHNE [*dazed*]

Morrighu, war goddess, stands between.
Her black wing touched me upon the shoulder, and
All is intelligible.

[THE MORRIGU *goes out.*

Maeve put me in a trance.

Though when Cuchulain slept with her as a boy
She seemed as pretty as a bird, she has changed,
She has an eye in the middle of her forehead.

CUCHULAIN

A woman that has an eye in the middle of her fore-
head !

A woman that is headed like a crow !
But she that put those words into your mouth
Had nothing monstrous ; you put them there yourself ;
You need a younger man, a friendlier man,
But, fearing what my violence might do,
Thought out these words to send me to my death,
And were in such excitement you forgot
The letter in your hand.

EITHNE

Now that I wake
I say that Maeve did nothing out of reason ;
What mouth could you believe if not my mouth ?

CUCHULAIN

When I went mad at my son's death and drew
My sword against the sea, it was my wife
That brought me back.

EITHNE

Better women than I
Have served you well, but 'twas to me you turned.

CUCHULAIN

You thought that if you changed I'd kill you for it,
When everything sublunary must change,
And if I have not changed that goes to prove
That I am monstrous.

EITHNE

You're not the man I loved,
That violent man forgave no treachery.
If, thinking what you think, you can forgive,
It is because you are about to die.

CUCHULAIN

Spoken too loudly and too near the door ;
Speak low if you would speak about my death,
Or not in that strange voice exulting in it.
Who knows what ears listen behind the door ?

EITHNE

Some that would not forgive a traitor, some
That have the passion necessary to life,
Some not about to die. When you are gone
I shall denounce myself to all your cooks,
Scullions, armourers, bed-makers, and messengers,
Until they hammer me with a ladle, cut me with a
knife,
Impale me upon a spit, put me to death
By what foul way best please their fancy,

So that my shade can stand among the shades
And greet your shade and prove it is no traitor.

CUCHULAIN

Women have spoken so, plotting a man's death.

[*Enter a* SERVANT.

SERVANT

Your great horse is bitted. All wait the word.

CUCHULAIN

I come to give it, but must ask a question.
This woman, wild with grief, declares that she
Out of pure treachery has told me lies
That should have brought my death. What can I do?
How can I save her from her own wild words?

SERVANT

Is her confession true?

CUCHULAIN

I make the truth!
I say she brings a message from my wife.

SERVANT

What if I make her swallow poppy-juice?

CUCHULAIN

What herbs seem suitable, but protect her life
As if it were your own, and should I not return
Give her to Conall Caernach because the women
Have called him a good lover.

EITHNE

I might have peace that know
The Morrigu, the woman like a crow,
Stands to my defence and cannot lie,
But that Cuchulain is about to die.

[Pipe and drum. The stage grows dark for a moment. When it lights up again, it is empty. CUCHULAIN enters wounded. He tries to fasten himself to a pillar-stone with his belt. AOIFE, an erect white-haired woman, enters.]

AOIFE

Am I recognised, Cuchulain?

CUCHULAIN

You fought with a sword,
It seemed that we should kill each other, then
Your body wearied and I took your sword.

AOIFE

But look again, Cuchulain! Look again!

CUCHULAIN

Your hair is white.

AOIFE

That time was long ago,
And now it is my time. I have come to kill you.

CUCHULAIN

Where am I? Why am I here?

AOIFE

You asked their leave,
When certain that you had six mortal wounds,
To drink out of the pool.

CUCHULAIN

I have put my belt
About this stone and want to fasten it
And die upon my feet, but am too weak.
Fasten this belt.

[She helps him to do so.]

And now I know your name,
Aoife, the mother of my son. We met
At the Hawk's Well under the withered trees.
I killed him upon Baile's Strand, that is why
Maeve parted ranks that she might let you through.
You have a right to kill me.

AOIFE

Though I have,
Her army did not part to let me through.
The grey of Macha, that great horse of yours
Killed in the battle, came out of the pool
As though it were alive, and went three times
In a great circle round you and that stone,
Then leaped into the pool, and not a man
Of all that terrified army dare approach ;
But I approach.

CUCHULAIN

Because you have the right.

AOIFE

But I am an old woman now, and that
Your strength may not start up when the time comes
I wind my veil about this ancient stone
And fasten you to it.

CUCHULAIN

But do not spoil your veil.
Your veils are beautiful, some with threads of gold.

AOIFE

I am too old to care for such things now.
[*She has wound the veil about him.*]

CUCHULAIN

There was no reason so to spoil your veil :
I am weak from loss of blood.

AOIFE

I was afraid,
But now that I have wound you in the veil
I am not afraid. But — how did my son fight ?

CUCHULAIN

Age makes more skilful but not better men.

AOIFE

I have been told you did not know his name
And wanted, because he had a look of me,
To be his friend, but Conchubar forbade it.

CUCHULAIN

Forbade it and commanded me to fight ;
That very day I had sworn to do his will,

Yet refused him, and spoke about a look ;
But somebody spoke of witchcraft and I said
Witchcraft had made the look, and fought and killed
him.

Then I went mad, I fought against the sea.

AOIFE

I seemed invulnerable ; you took my sword,
You threw me on the ground and left me there.
I searched the mountain for your sleeping-place
And laid my virgin body at your side,
And yet, because you had left me, hated you,
And thought that I would kill you in your sleep,
And yet begot a son that night between
Two black thorn-trees.

CUCHULAIN

I cannot understand.

AOIFE

Because about to die !

Somebody comes,
Some countryman, and when he finds you here,
And none to protect him, will be terrified.
I will keep out of his sight, for I have things
That I must ask questions on before I kill you.

[She goes. The BLIND MAN of On Baile's Strand comes in. He moves his stick about until he finds the standing stone ; he lays his stick down, stoops and touches CUCHULAIN'S feet. He feels the legs.]

BLIND MAN

Ah ! Ah !

CUCHULAIN

I think you are a blind old man.

BLIND MAN

A blind old beggar-man. What is your name ?

CUCHULAIN

Cuchulain.

BLIND MAN

They say that you are weak with wounds.
I stood between a Fool and the sea at Baile's Strand
When you went mad. What's bound about your hands
So that they cannot move ? Some womanish stuff.
I have been fumbling with my stick since dawn
And then heard many voices. I began to beg.
Somebody said that I was in Maeve's tent,
And somebody else, a big man by his voice,
That if I brought Cuchulain's head in a bag
I would be given twelve pennies ; I had the bag
To carry what I get at kitchen doors,
Somebody told me how to find the place ;
I thought it would have taken till the night,
But this has been my lucky day.

CUCHULAIN

Twelve pennies !

BLIND MAN

I would not promise anything until the woman,
The great Queen Maeve herself, repeated the words.

CUCHULAIN

Twelve pennies ! What better reason for killing a man ?
You have a knife, but have you sharpened it ?

BLIND MAN

I keep it sharp because it cuts my food.

[*He lays bag on ground and begins feeling* CUCHULAIN's body, his hands mounting upward.

CUCHULAIN

I think that you know everything, Blind Man.
My mother or my nurse said that the blind
Know everything.

BLIND MAN

No, but they have good sense.
How could I have got twelve pennies for your head
If I had not good sense ?

CUCHULAIN

There floats out there
The shape that I shall take when I am dead,
My soul's first shape, a soft feathery shape,
And is not that a strange shape for the soul
Of a great fighting-man ?

BLIND MAN

Your shoulder is there,
This is your neck. Ah ! Ah ! Are you ready, Cuchulain ?

CUCHULAIN

I say it is about to sing.

[*The stage darkens.*

BLIND MAN

Ah ! Ah !

[*Music of pipe and drum, the curtain falls. The*

music ceases as the curtain rises upon a bare stage. There is nobody upon the stage except a woman with a crow's head. She is THE MORRIGU. She stands towards the back. She holds a black parallelogram, the size of a man's head. There are six other parallelograms near the back-cloth.

THE MORRIGU

The dead can hear me, and to the dead I speak.
This head is great Cuchulain's, those other six
Gave him six mortal wounds. This man came first ;
Youth lingered though the years ran on, that season
A woman loves the best. Maeve's latest lover,
This man, had given him the second wound,
He had possessed her once ; these were her sons,
Two valiant men that gave the third and fourth ;
These other men were men of no account,
They saw that he was weakening and crept in ;
One gave him the sixth wound and one the fifth ;
Conall avenged him. I arranged the dance.

[EMER enters. THE MORRIGU places the head of CUCHULAIN upon the ground and goes out. EMER runs in and begins to dance. She so moves that she seems to rage against the heads of those that had wounded CUCHULAIN, perhaps makes movements as though to strike them, going three times round the circle of the heads. She then moves towards the head of CUCHULAIN ; it may, if need be, be raised above the others on a pedestal. She moves as if in adoration or triumph. She is about to prostrate herself before it, perhaps does so, then rises, looking up as if listening ; she seems to hesitate between the head and what she hears.

Then she stands motionless. There is silence and in the silence a few faint bird notes.

The stage darkens slowly. Then comes loud music, but now it is quite different. It is the music of some Irish Fair of our day. The stage brightens. EMER and the head are gone. . . . There is no one there but the three musicians. They are in ragged street-singers' clothes ; two of them begin to pipe and drum. They cease. The street-singer begins to sing.

SINGER

The harlot sang to the beggar-man.
I meet them face to face,
Conall, Cuchulain, Usna's boys,
All that most ancient race ;
Maeve had three in an hour, they say.
I adore those clever eyes,
Those muscular bodies, but can get
No grip upon their thighs.
I meet those long pale faces,
Hear their great horses, then
Recall what centuries have passed
Since they were living men.
That there are still some living
That do my limbs unclothe,
But that the flesh my flesh has gripped
I both adore and loathe.

[Pipe and drum music.

Are those things that men adore and loathe
Their sole reality ?
What stood in the Post Office
With Pearse and Connolly ?

What comes out of the mountain
Where men first shed their blood,
Who thought Cuchulain till it seemed
He stood where they had stood ?

No body like his body
Has modern woman borne,
But an old man looking back on life
Imagines it in scorn.
A statue's there to mark the place,
By Oliver Sheppard done.
So ends the tale that the harlot
Sang to the beggar-man.

[Music from pipe and drum.]

THE END

